

BUSH ORDERS SMALLPOX SHOTS FOR MILITARY, FIRST RESPONDERS

By Kathleen T. Rhem / American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Dec. 13, 2002 -- President Bush today announced he has ordered smallpox vaccinations to begin for military personnel.

He also recommended medical personnel and first responders receive the vaccine, but on a voluntary basis. Administration officials stopped short of recommending widespread vaccinations of the American public.

"Men and women who could be on the frontlines of a biological attack must be protected," the president said during an afternoon press briefing in the Old Executive Office Building.

The president stressed his decision was not based on a specific threat, but on the renewed focus on security brought about by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the subsequent anthrax attacks through the mail.

"To protect our citizens in the aftermath of Sept. 11, we are evaluating old threats in a new light," he said.

Smallpox is highly contagious viral disease. It is often fatal and nearly always disfiguring. There is no cure or treatment.

The eradication of smallpox as a naturally occurring disease is one of the greatest triumphs of the World Health Organization. Bush noted the risk of smallpox was so remote by 1972 the United States quit routine vaccinations.

The military continued vaccinating recruits until 1990.

A DoD release indicated the department will immunize personnel based on their occupational responsibilities, with emergency response teams and hospital and clinic workers receiving the vaccine first. Next will be those individuals with "critical mission capabilities."

The smallpox vaccine is licensed by the Food and Drug Administration and is from the same stocks used before routine vaccinations stopped in the 1970s. Though the vaccine is considered safe and effective, vaccination is not without risks. Medical officials warn that there is a slight possibility of severe reactions for some people.

Public health officials warn that pregnant women, individuals with weakened immune systems, and those with certain skin disorders shouldn't receive the smallpox vaccine.

During today's announcement, Bush said he'd be vaccinated because he wouldn't order military personnel to take anything he wasn't willing to take himself. However, he added,

his family and staff would not be getting the vaccines because public health and national security experts are not recommending them for the general public.

"These vaccinations are a precaution only and not a response to any information concerning imminent danger," Bush said. "Given the current level of the threat, and the inherent health risks of the vaccine, we have decided not to initiate a broader vaccination program for all Americans at this time."

The president noted that the cautionary vaccinations are a necessary step to guard against possible threats to the nation. "It is prudent to prepare for the possibility that terrorists who kill indiscriminately would use disease as a weapon," he said.